

Salvation, Hope and Apocalyptic: Emerging Ecologies

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“Rediscovering Salvation”

New Creation and an abundant Gospel

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Introduction

This paper aims to bring together the conference themes and my own personal and academic explorations of holistic theology and praxis. It includes a brief discussion around views of salvation, hope and healing, and explores some apocalyptic views along with the notion of the Anthropocene.

I must first mention that this paper assumes ecological matters are an integral part of Christian theology and praxis. Rather than providing a comprehensive argument in this paper, I refer to the increasing amount of rigorous and contextual work being done in the area of ecotheology and also my previous work that contends that spiritual, social, physical and ecological elements are inherently interrelated.¹

Questions coming out of this paper include: What might salvation mean and how might salvation be experienced in currently emerging ecological contexts? How might apocalyptic ecological views affect understanding salvation as new creation, abundance, and fullness of life? I hope to create space for reflection on potential theological and practical responses, and consider contextually relevant and hopeful salvific practices of theology and mission that aim to address the interrelated social, spiritual, economic and ecological issues we face together.

Salvation: Problematics and Pathways

It can be argued that individualism has increased both within and outside the church. Similarly, it can be argued that individualism has increased in terms of views on salvation, as private and personal rather than shared and communal. Furthermore,

¹ This includes: *Yellow, Red, Blue and Green: Exploring ecological aspects of The Salvation Army*, forthcoming, Salvo Publishing; "Dark Green Religion and the Wesleyan Tradition: Harmony and Dissonance". *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48:1 (2013), 135-148. "Recapturing a Salvationist Vision for all of Earth". *Thought Matters* 2 (2012), 97-107; "Red, Yellow, Blue and Green: Eco-Theology within The Salvation Army," *Aldersgate Papers* 9 (2011), 48-66. See more at <http://uq.academia.edu/MattSeaman/>.

there are issues around dualistic thinking within Christian belief and practice. For instance, as N.T Wright has contended, for some followers of Christ:

Belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection is all about God's supernatural action in the world, legitimating an upstairs-downstairs view of reality ... in which the supernatural is the real world and the natural, the this-worldly, is secondary and largely irrelevant.²

Wesleyan scholar, Howard Snyder, puts forward some options if choosing to live with a spiritual/physical dualism: (1) "Doing our best to avoid schizophrenia, but living with unresolved tension"; (2) "Opt for matter over spirit, abandoning spirituality as irrelevant or unobtainable"; (3) "Opt for spirit over matter ... denying, despising or ignoring the material world"; Or (4) become "thoroughgoing dualists" with a "split-level worldview, operating as though 'spirit' and 'matter' were two unconnected worlds with incompatible software and different sets of rules."³

Snyder argues that none of these four views has a healthy or biblical starting assumption: "spirit and matter are not two different worlds. They are interlaced dimensions of the one world God created in its entirety and intends to redeem, save, liberate, and heal in its entirety."⁴ Furthermore, Snyder argues that "salvation ultimately means creation healed."⁵

Looking back to the Army founders offers broader outlooks on salvation and also an example that perspectives can morph and widen during the lifespan. As Roger Green has noted:

From 1849 to 1865 the primary emphasis of Booth's redemptive theology was upon justification by faith for the sinner and sanctification by faith for the believer. In his later ministry ... he

² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 220.

³ Howard Snyder with Joel Scandrett. *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), x.

⁴ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, x.

⁵ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xiv.

expanded both his vision of redemption and his language, which took into account this enlarged vision.⁶

This expanded vision was expressed as “salvation for both worlds”.⁷ It was around this time that Booth’s broader vision was shared more widely through the publication of *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. Green states this was part of “the most dramatic change ... in Booth’s comprehension of salvation as *both* personal *and* social.”⁸ In this, individual and communal notions of salvation were merged into Booth’s scheme, which “aimed to see people saved spiritually from sin and temptation, as well as saved physically from the pollution and poverty that pervaded the increasingly industrialised cities of English society”.⁹

The Anthropocene

The Industrial Revolution was already progressing prior to *In Darkest England*, and has caused significant changes to emerge within many aspects of life in creation. Some of these changes were implied or referred to within *Darkest England*. Increasingly, humanity has displayed an impressive array of ways to control, exert power and sometimes unhealthy dominion over the rest of the Earth: large-scale monoculture, non-native introduction and eradication of plants and animals, deforestation and change in land cover, and technological advances in weaponry and materials; increased urbanisation and population, the extent of inequalities, globalisation, capitalism, consumerism and related ecological and human health issues.

Based on the notion that humankind had become such a destructive agent of change upon ecosystems around the world, biologist Eugene Stoermer reflected on the idea that a new era in the earth’s history was taking shape. In the 1980s he began referring to this new time period as the “Anthropocene”.¹⁰

⁶ Roger Green, “Theological Roots of In Darkest England And The Way Out,” in *Darkness and Deliverance: 125 Years of the ‘In Darkest England’ Scheme*, ed. Matthew Seaman (Nambour, Chaordic Creative, 2016), 26. Ebook format also available (Salvo Publishing, Melbourne).

⁷ William Booth, ‘Salvation for Both Worlds’, *All the World* 5 (January, 1889). See also Green, “Theological Roots”.

⁸ Green, “Theological Roots,” 26.

⁹ Matthew Seaman, “Introduction” in *Darkness and Deliverance: 125 Years of the ‘In Darkest England’ Scheme*, ed. Matthew Seaman (Nambour, Chaordic Creative, 2016), 8.

¹⁰ Anthro(human)cene(age). The term was popularised in 2000 by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate, Paul Crutzen, and has been increasingly used in popular and scientific literature.

The starting point of the Anthropocene is still undecided as there are numerous options available.¹¹ Lewis and Maslin wonder whether choosing a particular starting date or event for the Anthropocene may affect “the perception of human actions on the environment ... [and] the stories people construct about the ongoing development of human societies.”¹² They clarify using two examples. The first being the atmospheric CO₂ minima date around the year 1610 (linked to European nations locating and colonising the Americas):

Implies that colonialism, global trade and coal brought about the Anthropocene. Broadly, this highlights social concerns, particularly the unequal power relationships between different groups of people, economic growth, the impacts of globalized trade, and our current reliance on fossil fuels. [It] also highlights a long-term and large-scale example of human actions unleashing processes that are difficult to predict or manage.¹³

Whereas choosing the point at 1964 (peak radioactive carbon-14),

Tells a story of an elite-driven technological development that threatens planet-wide destruction. The long-term advancement of technology deployed to kill people, from spears to nuclear weapons, highlights the more general problem of ‘progress traps’.¹⁴

Bahn and Flenley considered some of these issues through their archaeological and biogeographical work, and have stated their concerns for humanity generally, particularly in terms of the continuing problem of human selfishness and the impacts on the world:

This is what is so worrying. Humankind's covetousness is boundless. Its selfishness appears to be genetically inborn ... But in a limited

¹¹ Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (2015), 175.

¹² Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 177-178.

¹³ Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 177-178.

¹⁴ Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 178.

ecosystem, selfishness leads to increasing population imbalance, population crash, and ultimately extinction.¹⁵

Human brokenness and imperfection is not surprising for Salvationists, yet it is important to note that human selfishness and greed have caused ecological and social collapse. There is evidence to suggest that a number of ancient civilizations, including the Mesopotamian, Minoan and Mycenaean, were weakened and even devastated by deforestation.¹⁶ The history of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) provides another dramatic example.

This remote small island in the southeastern Pacific Ocean has, in Hunt's view, become "a paragon for prehistoric human induced ecological catastrophe and cultural collapse".¹⁷ Whatever the exact confluence of issues, it still appears likely that "in just a few centuries, the people of Easter Island wiped out their forest, drove their plants and animals to extinction, and saw their complex society spiral into chaos and cannibalism".¹⁸ Reflecting on the probable collapse narrative, Jared Diamond asks:

Why didn't they look around, realize what they were doing, and stop before it was too late? What were they thinking when they cut down the last palm tree?¹⁹

This case of cultural collapse on Rapa Nui has been used as an "ecological parable" for today's society as a warning against ignoring the health and well-being of the ecosystems within which we live, breathe and have our being. Hypothetical questions could be: What might have salvation meant for the people of Rapa Nui? Would this be purely spiritual salvation or more holistic (spiritual/social/ecological) understandings of salvation? Less hypothetically: How might holistic salvation translate for us and our communities in God's creation today?

¹⁵ Paul Bahn and John Flenley. *Easter Island, Earth Island* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 214.

¹⁶ Shuichi Yamamoto and Victor Kuwahara, "Deforestation and Civilization: A Buddhist Perspective," *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 15(2005).

¹⁷ Terry Hunt, "Rethinking Easter Island's ecological catastrophe," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 34 (2007): 485.

¹⁸ Jared Diamond, "Easter's End" in *Discover* 9 (1995), 63.

¹⁹ Diamond, "Easter's End," 68.

Apocalyptic

There are dire scientific projections for the future health and wellbeing for humanity and God's creation. There are numerous papers and illustrations that provide brief overviews of current and future impacts of climate variability and potential impacts on people and societies.²⁰ Bron Taylor asserts that environmental apocalypticism today is in one way different and even innovative – “this is the first time that an expectation of the end of the known world has been grounded in environmental science.”²¹ In terms of Christian eschatology, the book of Revelation is likely the most familiar apocalyptic text, from which various eschatological views have emerged.²² Three common views include postmillennialism (William Booth's framework), premillennialism (a view dramatized in the 'Left Behind' series), and amillennialism (symbolic timespans).

It is interesting to briefly note interpretations of Revelation relating to the Anthropocene. Initially, it appears that ecological apocalyptic fuses well with premillennial apocalyptic, where a future of tribulation and suffering occurs before the renewal of creation. Woods notes that the:

Catastrophic effects of climate change invite comparisons with the “plagues” or wounds of the earth described in chapters 15 and 16 of the Book of Revelation. The seven Bowls of Wrath can be interpreted as an ecological parable for the decades ahead.²³

Woods continues, noting that:

²⁰ For example: <http://www.blackpressusa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ecoamerica-infographic.png>. Accessed September 20 2016.

²¹ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 84.

²² Consider also Isa 24:2-5. Apocalyptic literature is that which aims to describe or prophesy the end of the known world, and can be found in numerous places. One of my favourite bands is the hard-to-classify, mewwithoutYou. Their latest album “Pale Horses” – a reference to Revelation – is self-described as “meandering, technicolor vision of a world apocalyptic ... breathing fresh life into the end times, gloriously terrifying and hauntingly iconic” (<http://mewithoutyou.com/pages/pale-horses>). One commentator suggests a song from that album, “Magic Lantern Days”, was written as a sort of “skewed hymn of worship to overwhelming technological power (exemplified here by an atomic bomb) in a technocracy of sorts, born by our pride and hubris ... Who wants ancient mystery and holiness when we can harness all of the power of technological advancement to overcome our problems?” (<http://genius.com/6888409>).

²³ Richard Woods, “Seven Bowls of Wrath: The Ecological Relevance of Revelation,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 38 (2008): 64.

"The "bowls of wrath" demonstrate an unusually sophisticated insight into the organic connection that exists among biological and geological systems and also the consequences of wantonly disrupting this balance through human greed, oppression, and malice.²⁴

Another notable area of increased individualism is the mixture of capitalism and the "global market". Yet, there can also be communal aspects that may appear to provide a form of "salvation" for individuals, groups and states. In terms of global capitalism, Hopkins has demonstrated that all the elements traditionally used to define religion can be applied and fit clearly with globalisation.²⁵ Devotees of globalisation have a system of beliefs and practices, faith, theological anthropology, and "religious" leadership who share and proclaim the values inherent to the revelation and theology of globalisation. Indian theologian, George Zachariah, uncompromisingly argues that the god of globalisation "is Mammon whose *telos* is to maximize wealth by commodifying and marketizing living beings".²⁶ Zachariah contends that globalisation can be seen as another religious movement:

Globalization ... is in itself a God-talk with the vision and promise of a teleology, and a missionary zeal motivated by a sense of deontology ... [it is] a new religion ... In the place of the old dictum of "no salvation outside the church" there emerged the new dictum: "no salvation outside the market."²⁷

Futures in this global economic situation often include momentous or catastrophic apocalyptic visions, summoning the spectres of recession, depression, and boom-bust cycles. The horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation can often be invoked. For example, Ivanko and Kivirist mention the horsemen-related horrors of pestilence, war,

²⁴ Woods, "Seven Bowls of Wrath," 64.

²⁵ D. Hopkins, "The Religion of Globalization" in *Religions/Globalizations: Theories and Cases*, ed. D. Hopkins, Durham: Duke University, 2001.

²⁶ George Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots*, (London, UK: Equinox, 2011): 34.

²⁷ Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated*, 34.

famine and death, and make a connection to four current fears: climate change, ecological collapse, peak oil and debt.²⁸

In terms of an apocalyptic view of the future that includes collapse of the current socio-economic system, Dave Pollard makes interesting use of the term 'Salvationist'. Pollard's thirteen groupings are shared between two viewpoints: Collapsniks or Salvationists. In Pollard's representation, 'Salvationists' are those who see "civilisation can/will be reformed and 'saved'," where 'saving' refers to "reforming civilization so as to save humans from suffering its collapse".²⁹

Commentators have added extra groups to Pollard's map. For example, "those that [have] no discernible view at all. They're called consumers and they are focused on their careers, kids, retirement, sports or the latest thing-a-ma-bob."³⁰ Where might Salvation Army Salvationists fit in this schema? "Rapturists" (group B)? "Deniers" (group A)? Transition/Resilience Movement (group G)? Unconcerned consumers? Various combinations? At this point, should we ask: "Can there be a healthy church on a sick planet?"³¹

Salvation, Healing, Hope

The Scriptures broadly express the issue of brokenness and sin throughout all dimensions of life and creation. Disease and dis-ease are spread throughout the entire Earth. The issues of sin and healing are inherently interrelated throughout the entirety

²⁸ John Ivanko and Lisa Kivirist. *Ecopreneuring [Putting Purpose and the Planet before Profits]*, (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2008), 33.

²⁹ For the full map of Pollard's thoughts, including that of 'Salvationists,' see: David Pollard, "The New Political Map," accessed September 2016, <http://howtosavetheworld.ca/images/The-New-Political-Map-2015.pdf>

³⁰ Comments and blog accessed September 2016, <http://howtosavetheworld.ca/2013/02/04/preparing-for-collapse-the-new-political-map/>. Another commentator added the groups "the 1%" and "TL/DR" (Too long, didn't read). These comments reminded me of Jonathan Raymond's thoughts on Salvationist views on holiness, where he sees that there are three main perspectives within Salvationism today: those who, with Samuel Logan Brengle, see holiness as a work of grace through a crisis event; those in agreement with Frederick Coutts who understand holiness as a process of growth; and third, "the largest camp of apathy, where holiness is not an issue" (Jonathan Raymond, "Social Holiness Journey, Exposures, Encounters", 3. Accessed at <http://holinessandunity.wikispaces.com/file/view/Social+Holiness-Raymond.pdf/444038718/Social%20Holiness-Raymond.pdf>).

³¹ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xiii. Panu Pihkala also notes that eco-anxiety will likely increase as a pastoral challenge for the church.

of creation, within all aspects such as the spiritual, economic, physical, political and ecological.³² The gospel includes the good news of personal justification by faith, atonement, forgiveness and redemption. However, as Snyder further contends, “the larger truth that encompasses all of these is healing- complete healing, creation restored, true shalom”.³³

Healing is a “remarkably rich metaphor for working out the nature of salvation”.³⁴ There are many scriptural references to God’s healing work. 2 Chr 7:14 declares God’s promise to “heal their land” if the people turn to God in humility, away from sin towards shalom, that is, “comprehensive well-being – healthy people in a flourishing land”.³⁵ Jesus spoke of the holistic health and shalom of the kingdom of God, and sent the disciples “out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). We also must consider Jesus’ healing work through the cross (1 Peter 2:24; Isa 53:4-5). As Snyder joyously proclaims: “Healing the world: now this is good news!”

In terms of current cultural and economic healing, Hawkin notes Revelation can be seen “not so much about revealing the End as it is about unmasking the realities of the present. It is, to use Christopher Rowland’s phrase, ‘an ancient Christian form of the critique of ideology’.”³⁶ Woods brings another valuable angle to the discussion on healing and hope:

The compensating divine response to ecocatastrophe ends not in ultimate punishment, but the renewal of the cosmos and the healing of the nations. Revelation is a message of hope as well as warning and a summons to repent.³⁷

This leads to considering practical theological questions, such as from the song *Pale Horse* by mewwithoutYou: “Comforted by sequences of sounds we knew: ‘you abide in me, and I in you’, but what exactly should I do?”

³² Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xvi. See also Matthew Bonzo and Michael Stevens, *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader’s Guide*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008).

³³ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xiv.

³⁴ Joel Green, *Salvation: Understanding Biblical Themes*, (St Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 52-53.

³⁵ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xiv.

³⁶ David Hawkin, “The Critique of Ideology in the Book of Revelation and its Implications for Ecology,” *Ecotheology* 8:2 (Dec 2003): 161.

³⁷ Woods, “Seven Bowls of Wrath,” 64.

Followers of Christ are to be ambassadors for salvation, healing and hope, sharing God's love and peace to each other, the church, communities and ecosystems we live within and depend upon. We can broaden views of salvation from notions of purely personal spirituality and/or eternity in heaven towards the healing, shalom and abundance for all life here right now in God's creation. We can partner in God's healing, salvific process through integrating, rather than separating life into purely spiritual or physical parts. As Joel Green contends:

People are not saved in isolation from the world around them ... the metaphor of healing serves as an invitation to the people of God, not only to be recipients of God's good gifts of salvation, but also to be agents of healing, to be a community of compassion and restoration.³⁸

In light of current and potential ecological concerns, seeing salvation as new creation, abundance, and fullness of life for all of God's loved creation can sometimes be challenging. Yet, as Scandinavian ecotheologian Panu Pihkala insists: "we need to frame the Christian story as hope in the midst of tragedy. Optimism may be difficult, but still there is hope."³⁹ Furthermore:

Christian hope is sustained by, and expresses itself in, a reverent grateful love for the good earth ... the never-ending struggle for the Good Society [and] faith in the kingdom of God.⁴⁰

Likely having raised more questions than answers, I conclude with one question and one hopeful declaration:

³⁸ Green, *Salvation*, 52-53.

³⁹ Panu Pihkala, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonne Fall: Ecotheology in the Anthropocene" (paper presented at the 2016 ECEN Assembly, Helsinki. Accessed September 20, 2016, http://www.ecen.org/uploads-public/ECEN%202016_Panu%20Pihkala_final_2.pdf).

⁴⁰ Daniel Day Williams, *God's Grace and Man's Hope* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949): 163. Cited in Panu Pihkala, "Rediscovery of Early Twentieth-Century Ecotheology," *Open Theology* 2 (2016), 276.

How might salvation be more deeply and holistically understood, experienced and contextually shared by Salvationists within God's creation for God's glory?

"The good news of Jesus is even better than we thought."⁴¹

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⁴¹ Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, xi.

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